

WRIS FAQs

What is the WRIS?

The WRIS is the Wage Record Interchange System, a clearinghouse through which states may obtain UI wage records for individuals who have been employed in another state or states.

Why was the WRIS developed?

Although the idea behind the WRIS had been discussed for quite some time, the passage of the Workforce Investment Act, with its emphasis on tracking state program and training provider performance, its mandate that wages be used as a performance measure, and its encouragement of the interstate exchange of wage data, prompted the development of a system for meeting these goals. The WRIS provides participating states with employment and wage information regarding the individuals to whom they have provided workforce investment services, even if those individuals have found employment in another state.

The wage and employment data available through the WRIS allows states and local areas to present a more complete and accurate report of their performance in the delivery of workforce investment services.

For what programs can the WRIS be used?

The WRIS was originally designed to be used for WIA Title IB programs covering adults, dislocated workers, and youth. The WRIS was subsequently expanded to allow its use for programs authorized under the Wagner-Peyser Act as well as other programs identified in the Workforce Investment Act: Welfare to Work, the Trade Act, and the VETS program.

Future expansion of the system may also permit its use for DOL grant programs - Migrant and Seasonal Farmworker, Older American Community Service, Native American, Veterans Workforce Investment, Youth Opportunity, and Job Corps – so long as such use can be accomplished in a manner which is consistent with the confidentiality provisions of the WRIS Data Sharing Agreement.

How does the WRIS help states meet assessment and reporting requirements of the programs for which it is available?

The Workforce Investment Act creates a performance accountability system to assess the effectiveness of states and local areas in achieving continuous improvement of workforce investment activities. The system requires that states and local areas, as part of regular performance accountability assessments, consider the impact of workforce investment services delivered through various programs upon the subsequent employment, employment retention, and wages of the recipients of those services. States already have access to employment and wage information for individuals who become employed in the state where they received workforce services. However, the mobility of the nation's workforce dictates that in order to accurately measure the benefits derived from workforce investment services, employment and wages earned outside the state where the services were provided should be measured in addition to those earned locally.

Wage and employment information provided through the WRIS will generally relate to three groups of individuals: 1) those who receive workforce investment services in one state and subsequently locate to another state to obtain employment; 2) those who receive workforce investment services and maintain a residence in one state but subsequently obtain employment in a neighboring state; and 3) those who receive workforce investment services and maintain their residence and primary employment in one state but subsequently obtain a second or third job in a neighboring state. This information would not be available to state and local areas without interstate data sharing arrangements such as the WRIS. Without this information, states and local areas could fail to meet their performance and reporting requirements despite their successful efforts in delivering workforce investment services to these individuals.

My state already has an interstate data sharing agreement with several neighboring states. Why would it need to join the WRIS?

The WRIS has been designed to be a nationwide system which will ultimately make data available from nearly all UI jurisdictions. The system will provide data to states well beyond those which share a border or are located in the same geographic region of the country. Given the mobility of the American workforce, this is a very valuable feature for any state or local area that desires to maximize its performance results.

A recent test run of Florida's Wagner-Peyser client database against the WRIS' Distributed Data Base Index illustrated the potential value of a nationwide system like the WRIS to the participating states. The test run of approximately 800,000 records identified wage record matches in the system - indicating that wages had been reported for these individuals to other participating WRIS states over a seven quarter period - for over 63,000 individuals. This overall data return rate was not surprising given that the states which have already joined the WRIS represent more than half of the total civilian, non-institutional employment in the nation. However, it is the distribution of wage records reflected in the match that more tellingly illustrates the value of the WRIS to participating states. As would be expected, Florida's neighboring states of Alabama and Georgia did account for nearly 22,000 wage record matches. However, the non-border states of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Texas accounted for another 18,000 records and such far-flung states as Wisconsin, Vermont, Maine, New York, Ohio, and Rhode Island added another 23,000 records to the total.

These results suggest that states which rely solely on data-sharing agreements with border states or with states within their regions to augment intrastate wage data for performance and reporting purposes will miss a large number of wage records that could otherwise be captured through a nationwide data sharing system such as the WRIS. In this example, a data-sharing agreement between Florida and its border states would have provided only 35% of the total data provided through the WRIS; an agreement between Florida and other states in a broadly drawn region surrounding it would have provided only 63% of the data made available through the WRIS. Respectively, the regional or border-state data sharing agreements would have missed between 37% and 65% of the data made available to Florida through the WRIS for inclusion in its Wagner-Peyser reports. Also, keep in mind that these results were achieved at a time when the number of states participating in the WRIS was only 21, including Florida. As more states enter the system, the available pool of wage and employment data will grow significantly.

The same WRIS employment and wage data is also available to states for their use in developing a certification and consumer report program for their training providers as required in the Workforce Investment Act. The Act establishes certain eligibility criteria for certification including specific performance measures such as wages earned by recipients of the training. Wage records from the WRIS may be utilized to verify performance levels for the certification process and also to form the basis for aggregate data required to be provided by states to potential consumers of training services.

Who can participate in the WRIS?

The WRIS is open only to the fifty-three UI jurisdictions, i.e. the fifty states, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia. These entities are referred to as "states" throughout the rest of this document. No other public or private entities are eligible to participate in the WRIS.

Each state will have two primary parties involved in WRIS transactions: (1) the SUIA (State Unemployment Insurance Agency or equivalent), which is the supplier of wage information; and (2) the PACIA (Performance Accountability and Customer Information Agency), which is the consumer of wage information and the entity identified as being responsible for performance accountability and eligible trainer provider certification under the Workforce Investment Act.

Any state wishing to receive wage data must also be willing to share its wage data with all other participating states and must enter into a Data Sharing Agreement in which it agrees to comply with various confidentiality provisions relating to the handling and disclosure of the data.

How does the WRIS operate?

The WRIS has been designed to operate very simply and efficiently. Participating WRIS states submit wage requests through the WRIS via the Internet, identifying individuals for whom they are seeking wage and employment data by their social security numbers. The WRIS Operations Contractor searches the DDBI, identifying those states that have wage records on file for those social security number(s) contained in the wage request and sends the wage request only to those states with records. The receiving state(s) responds to the wage request by sending the wage records back through the WRIS where the response can then be downloaded by the requesting state.

What is the DDBI?

The DDBI is the Distributed Database Index, an index of all social security numbers for which wages have been reported to participating states over a period of up to eight quarters. The DDBI will contain three information items for each entry – social security number, quarter for which wages were reported, and the state that holds the wage record. The DDBI is continuously updated by participating states in accordance with a schedule maintained by Lockheed Martin, the WRIS Operations Contractor. States must keep their DDBI data current in order to be eligible to obtain wage data through the WRIS.

The DDBI was developed to facilitate the efficient direction of WRIS wage requests only to states which actually have pertinent data. This eliminates the need for states to screen requests individually and reduces unnecessary traffic on the system, thereby speeding up the response time for system users.

What data will actually be available through the WRIS?

The WRIS will provide wage data for up to eight consecutive quarters. The data which will be provided from the responding state to the requesting state will include the name, address, and FEIN for employers reporting wages for the employee, the wages earned, the quarter in which they were earned, and the SESA reporting the wages. For those states which collect employer SIC or the equivalent, that information will also be made available to requesting states.

Although states will generally wish to receive wage and employment data from any participating state possessing such data, the WRIS also allows PACIAs to customize their requests so that they will obtain data only from specified states.

NASWA is currently investigating the possibility of including federal and military employment and wage information in the WRIS.

Isn't the WRIS a national wage database?

The WRIS is not a national wage database for several reasons. First, the WRIS contains very limited data and only for those individuals for whom WRIS data requests have been made. Moreover, the data is only available for a limited period of time during which it can be downloaded by the requesting state. After that period of time has passed, the data will be automatically purged from the system. In addition, disclosure of the WRIS wage data is carefully monitored and controlled in accordance with the terms of the WRIS Data Sharing Agreement. Finally, all exchanges of wage data through the WRIS are intended to meet statutory mandates and for no other purposes. Once those mandates have been met, even the states holding wage data from other states will destroy the data.

Who operates the WRIS?

The WRIS is designed to operate as a user-friendly system through which a wage request can be made directly by an authorized PACIA employee and the reply can be sent by a SUIA and directly downloaded from a PC by the PACIA employee who made the request. However, overall technical operation of the WRIS is the responsibility of Lockheed Martin Corporation, the WRIS Operations Contractor. Lockheed Martin will operate and maintain the DDBI and the WRIS Clearinghouse, troubleshoot the system, provide user IDs and passwords to

employees authorized to handle WRIS data, and provide participating states with both start-up and ongoing technical support, including a help desk.

Administrative management of the WRIS is the responsibility of NASWA. NASWA will govern and oversee the administrative operations of the WRIS, monitor compliance with confidentiality provisions, prepare all reports regarding WRIS, act as liaison between participating states and the USDOL on WRIS matters, and provide administrative assistance to participating states and states wishing to join the system.

Is the WRIS fully operational?

The WRIS production system is now fully operational and the level of state participation continues to grow. An up-to-date listing of states that are currently participating in the system can be obtained at any time by contacting NASWA or by obtaining the list through the WRIS Watch link of the NASWA website, www.workforceatm.org.

Does participation in the WRIS prevent a state from entering into data sharing arrangements with other states or agencies?

No. The WRIS was never intended to be an exclusive data sharing arrangement between states. States – including those that have joined the WRIS - have traditionally exchanged data with other agencies within their state and with their sister states, either individually or through regional agreements. Nothing in the WRIS restricts participating states from entering into such arrangements.

Data obtained through the WRIS, however, may be exchanged only with other WRIS partners and is not available to be shared with other entities with whom the receiving state has other data sharing arrangements.

What must a state do to be technically ready to participate in the WRIS?

In order to conduct WRIS transactions, a state must finish six technical implementation steps, five of which are dependent upon the SUIA alone for completion and one of which involves the WRIS Operations Contractor. The steps are:

- Receive and review initial WRIS documentation
- Notify the Operations Contractor of a contact person for technical implementation issues
- Send a test DDBI tape to the Operations Contractor
- Send a complete DDBI tape to the Operations Contractor
- Install and test WRIS software at the SUIA
- Test SUIA software through ICON

Lockheed Martin Corporation, the WRIS Operations Contractor, is available to provide interested states with assistance in implementing these steps.

What administrative steps must a state take to be ready for WRIS participation?

In addition to completing the technical readiness steps set forth above, a state must also take the following administrative steps before it will be able to participate in the system:

- Designate a PACIA*
- Execute a WRIS Data Sharing Agreement and WRIS Operating Plan
- Review WRIS confidentiality provisions with individual employees in the PACIA and SUIA who will be handling WRIS data
- Require these employees to sign forms acknowledging WRIS confidentiality requirements and submit them to NASWA with requests for usernames and passwords
- Obtain WRIS usernames and passwords for all employees engaging in WRIS activities

NASWA offers assistance to states in completing these steps. A WRIS Questionnaire and Participation Checklist are available through the WRIS Watch (www.workforceatm.org) for the use of states wishing to receive additional information on the WRIS or to keep track of their progress in joining the system.

* **Note:** Nearly every Governor has already designated a PACIA as required under the Workforce Investment Act and notified the Secretary of Labor of the designation.

My state has not yet completed the technical readiness steps for participation. Must we wait until these steps are completed before we can go ahead and submit the paperwork needed to join the system?

No. States may work towards completion of their technical and administrative readiness steps concurrently and the state's progress on one element of participation should not affect its efforts to complete the other. For example, once the state has completed all paperwork to join the system (WRIS Data Sharing Agreement, WRIS Operating Plan, and authorized employee Acknowledgment forms) it should go ahead and submit these forms to NASWA. At the same time, it should continue to move forward with its technical readiness efforts. The same is true for those states that are ready to test their technical readiness before their paperwork has been completed. However, a state will not be able to participate in the WRIS until both the technical and administrative readiness steps have been completed.

Is technical support available to states participating in the WRIS?

Lockheed Martin is responsible for providing technical support to enable states to join the WRIS. This includes providing a general purpose interface to each participating PACIA and a specialized interface to each participating SUIA, either through its own interface or through the ICON.

In addition, Lockheed provides ongoing help desk services and technical assistance to all participating states.

What about administrative support?

Administrative support for states that are interested in joining the WRIS or have already joined the system is available from NASWA at any time.

Are there costs associated with participating in the WRIS?

The U.S. Department of Labor is funding all fixed costs associated with the operation and administration of the WRIS. States must cover their own WRIS start-up costs but the experience of states that have already joined the WRIS indicates that these costs are minimal. States are also responsible for costs associated with preparing WRIS requests and processing WRIS replies; however, much of these costs would have been borne by states in any case as part of their performance reporting requirements.

Is a SUIA compensated for the data it provides through the WRIS?

Currently, states are not compensated for data that they provide through the WRIS, just as they are not charged for data which they receive through the system.

Will the WRIS be able to handle the expected volume of traffic as more states join the system?

The WRIS has been designed to handle an average annual volume from PACIAs of up to 100 million wage record requests. This capacity should be sufficient to meet the needs of all the participating states. The WRIS will be able to process priority PACIA requests within a day; routine requests will be processed to SUIAs within a week with responses being sent soon thereafter. The system also has the capacity to allow states to request more rapid responses to wage record queries if circumstances demand it.

How do I know that wage data transmitted through the WRIS is secure?

The WRIS has been designed to operate with the highest levels of security currently available. Information shared through the WRIS Clearinghouse is transmitted through ICON, the communications infrastructure and interstate wage record exchange system that currently allows all 53 UI jurisdictions to transmit interstate UI claims, wages, and statistical data. This system has remained extremely secure since it began operating over twenty-five years ago.

In addition, all WRIS transmissions will be encrypted using Secure Socket Layer Technology and must be conducted in a physically secure location. Only individuals with WRIS user IDs and passwords will have access to the system.

Finally, a Data Sharing Agreement must be signed by representatives of the PACIA and SUIA of any state wishing to participate in the WRIS. The Agreement contains stringent confidentiality requirements to which the states agree to adhere in their handling of WRIS data.

How does the WRIS Data Sharing Agreement protect the confidentiality of WRIS data?

Although the Workforce Investment Act directed states to make wage data available to their sister states for purposes of state and local program assessment and for eligible trainer certification, the statute also cautioned that the exchange of data must be accomplished in a manner, "consistent with state law." As a result, NASWA undertook an analysis of state confidentiality laws, including a survey responded to by legal counsel and/or records access officers representing nearly all UI jurisdictions. The survey results indicated that most states already have statutory authority to share unemployment insurance wage data with sister states so long as certain confidentiality requirements set forth in state statutes are met. The survey also found that many states already have data sharing agreements in place with other states or even private entities which reflect these requirements.

The WRIS Data Sharing Agreement was drafted to address these state law confidentiality requirements, namely:

- Shared information may not be disclosed to third parties unless such disclosure is specifically authorized by the Agreement or unless the data is disclosed in aggregate form only.
- Information in electronic format must be stored and processed in such a way that unauthorized persons may not retrieve the information by means of a computer, remote terminal, or other means.
- Public employees having access to the information must be instructed regarding its confidential nature and the penalties for violating such confidentiality and must attest to the policies and procedures regarding confidentiality contained in the data sharing agreement.
- The data must be kept physically secure from possible access by unauthorized persons.
- The data may be used only to the extent necessary to assist in the valid administrative needs of the program receiving the data.
- The requesting agency may not use the information for any purpose except those specifically authorized under the agreement.

Any state wishing to review the WRIS Data Sharing Agreement in greater detail may obtain a copy from the WRIS Watch link of the NASWA website (www.workforceatm.org) or request a copy from NASWA.

What other information is available to my state to assist it in complying with the WRIS confidentiality requirements?

As the entity responsible for providing administrative information and support to states working with the WRIS, NASWA drafted Standards and Guidelines for the Handling of Confidential WRIS Data by PACIA and SUIA Employees, a document which must be read by each employee who will have access to WRIS wage data to familiarize himself/herself with all of the confidentiality provisions and details concerning WRIS.

In addition, NASWA also developed a form entitled, "Acknowledgment of Standards for Receipt and Handling of Confidential Information", which must be signed by employees having access to WRIS data prior to

their being issued a WRIS user ID and password. Employees signing this form acknowledge that they are aware of the confidentiality standards governing access to WRIS data and that they agree to be bound by such standards.

A User Guide For PACIA Employees, describing the WRIS operating process, has also been developed and is available to the states.

Finally, NASWA is currently developing a WRIS Confidentiality Training Program designed for employees having access to WRIS data. The training will be made available to WRIS staff in all participating states at the state's request.

How can states keep abreast of WRIS issues of interest to them?

States that are interested in WRIS issues may find information regarding the system and its current status via the WRIS Watch link on the Workforce ATM (www.workforceatm.org).

A WRIS Advisory Committee composed of representatives of states participating in the WRIS also meets on a regular basis to discuss WRIS issues, progress, and concerns. In addition, periodic reports on WRIS implementation and operation issues are provided to all participating states by NASWA.